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AUTHOR Prichard, Nancy S.
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ABSTRACT

Whether through separate courses, or, preferably, through an integration of the curriculum, Afro-American and other minority literature must become a part of English education if the curriculum is to have "integrity" and "relevance" and if the student is to have a satisfactory self-concept. The curriculum must reflect black contributions to the pluralistic nature of our culture, must provide an awareness of alternative life-styles open to man, must foster a healthy self-concept for blacks and a more realistic one for whites, and must help promote a rewarding participation in American life. (MF)

EVERYBODY'S LITERATURE

Nancy S. Prichard

You have invited me here today to talk about black literature, a task which I am particularly pleased to be asked to do. Any speaker likes a willing audience, and as more groups ask me to talk with them about Afro-American literature, I also find more acceptance of the idea that the literature of all of America's minority groups should be included in the regular classroom studies of America's students--or at least I notice less visible skepticism than I used to encounter. I would like to peg my remarks today to three words--integrity, self-concept, and relevance (which is, in some circles, now becoming as much maligned as it was once praised, as a concept; but perhaps we can inject some new respectability, or acceptability, into it). These three words can, I think, lead us to some of the central concerns involved in teaching Afro-American literature at every level, from pre-schoolers and their picture books to college students or graduate students and their scholarly endeavors.

The word integrity came to me not only as a consequence of my own experience in teaching African and Afro-American literature, but as a consequence of reading Dorothy Sterling's article, "What's Black and White and Read All Over," in the September 1969 ENGLISH JOURNAL. In that article Mrs. Sterling says, ". . . it is our heritage that we must talk about, not theirs," (p. 823) and being an English teacher, I was led to think about pronouns and how exclusive some of us have become in assigning referents to them--not consciously, perhaps, but as part of our total attitude. For

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too long "our heritage" as displayed in literature has been exclusive, prejudiced, racist, and incomplete. (This is true of other disciplines too--history, for example--but it is especially invidious in literature.) It is time--and I do not think it is yet too late--that we begin making our heritage as expressed in literature inclusive and complete. To give it, in the finest sense of the word, integrity. And when you look that up in your Funk & Wagnall's, you will find it to mean "uprightness of character; probity; honesty. The condition or quality of being unimpaired or sound. The state of being complete or undivided." And if we acknowledge the pluralistic nature of our culture, we must know that we cannot teach an honest, unimpaired, complete American Literature course, no matter how it is designated or designed at whatever level, without including minority group writers. If a small child reads only stories about one segment of society, urban or rural, rich or poor, black or white, his vicarious experience of the greater world is incomplete. If the junior high schooler's unit on Courage or Getting Along With Others includes only stories about white American children being courageous or solving personal relationships, his perception of the kind of people who can do these things is impaired. If the high school or college student studying the historical sweep of American literature reads only white writers' contributions to the growth of forms and themes and concerns as our country has grown, his sense of history is inevitably unsound. So, Afro-American literature (and that of other minority groups) should be integrated into existing courses because,

as Abraham Chapman has said, "literature by and about Negroes in the United States is not something separate or marginal, but an integral part of the whole fabric of American literature."[1] And a black student at Yale, in a letter to Saunders Redding, put it this way: "We believe that writing by black Americans is American writing, and that to segregate it from the body of American expression is a ridiculous exercise of ignorance, and that it does great harm to American literature as an instrument of cultural and aesthetic diagnosis. . . ."[2]

At the same time, however, I am aware that some of you may face urgent and reasonable demands for courses devoted exclusively to black literature, and I would say that such a course, well-taught, need not be divisive. We must admit that we have to do a lot of catching up on the literature we have missed; we have to provide for this generation of students and for ourselves an involvement with the literature of America's black writers that amounts to total immersion until we all get used to the idea of our new, complete, honest, and unimpaired culture. If we work at getting our standard courses properly representative of America's diversity, someday separate courses may not be needed. The only imperative I see is that Afro-American literature be taught in all grade schools, secondary schools, junior colleges, colleges, and universities, regardless of the racial make-up of their student body, faculty, or community.

And this brings me to the second of my three words, self-concept. We are all aware of the influence of literature as vicarious experience, of

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[1]Abraham Chapman. The Negro in American Literature. Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English, 1966, p. 5.

[2]Quoted by Saunders Redding in "The Black Youth Movement," The American Scholar, Autumn 1969, p. 587.

the persuasiveness of identifying with fictional characters, of the inner excitement that can come with vivid involvement in the worlds that books reveal to us. We know how literature can work, often unconsciously, to widen our sensibilities and sensitize our perceptions of ourselves and others. In the introduction to Anger and Beyond, Herbert Hill says:

> The literature created by Negroes is not only a protest against the irrational racial situation, not only an attempt to explain the unique status of American Negroes to white society and the world, but, most significantly, the literature of American Negroes is an attempt to explain the racial situation to themselves. "Who am I?" and "What am I?" and "Who are they?" are urgent questions. . . .[3]

Like all literature, that written by black Americans enlarges the possibilities of our being and becoming; not directly, of course, because as T. S. Eliot has pointed out, the knowledge about people and the world and their interactions gained through reading is knowledge about someone else's knowledge--but if education is partially a process of acquiring an awareness of alternatives open to man, then even knowing that other alternatives exist, whether directly available to us or not, is necessary to our education. The discerned alternatives for action and being need be neither practical nor probable; we need only be aware that they have been available to some man at some time. These alternatives do not even need to be attractive in terms of ourselves and our present world. Probably none of us, black or white, would want to be Bigger Thomas, even for his momentary sense of having done the impossible. The alternatives of action and being need only be present in our worlds--real and imaginary-- and one of the tragedies of

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[3]Herbert Hill, "Introduction," Anger, and Beyond, Harper and Row, p. xv.

segregation and its concomitant neglect of Afro-American literature has been to deprive all of us of the world of alternatives contained in that literature. Carl Holman, in an essay called "The Afternoon of a Young Poet" in Anger, and Beyond, recognized how destructive the lack of alternatives can be when he wrote:

> I was involved during those pre-war years in a quiet but no less desperate scramble simply to hold on to life and not go under. . . .For me and a good many others my age it was not a question really of having something to eat and a place to sleep. The battle was, rather, to find ways of withstanding the daily erosion, through tedium, through humiliation, through various short-term pleasures, of the sense of your own possibilities. Necessary, too, was some sensitivity to possibilities outside yourself. (pp. 152-3)

But what concept of possibilities, within or without, can our children develop if the only literary alternatives available to them are white? Imagine, if you are a woman, that all the books you read were about men--men's jobs, men's adventures, their games, their imaginings and school experiences, their interpretation of the relationships between men and women; or if you are a man, imagine that you could read only books about women's jobs, women's adventures, their imaginings, and school experiences, and attitudes about love and marriage and family life. And further, imagined that if you were allowed to read a book about your own sex, it was inevitably written by the opposite sex. Wouldn't you agree that your view of the world and your role in that world and of yourself as a human being might be distorted? What are we doing to the self-concepts of our children, then, if we eliminate from their world the lives and work and attitudes and adventures and even the language of black Americans? The effect on black children is obvious--

no role models except white people, for one thing, and inevitably a conviction that all literature is fantasy, no matter how realistic it purports to be, because when the black child or young adult emerges from the world of the book into the real world, he will find that only in rare cases will society allow him, or give him the chance, to follow the model. Or if the black characters in the books he reads perpetuate the stereotypes created by whites, the black child is bound to interpret himself according to those stereotypes--to a greater or lesser extent. And here I must point out that I am aware that for historical and sociological and economic reasons, black people in the past have sometimes deliberately fostered whitey's stereotypical blindness; it was one way of getting around the worst of Mr. Charlie's inhumanities, and a cruel necessity.

Well, if the black child's view of himself and the world is distorted by all-white characters in books, what about the self-concept of the white child faced with this same reading fare? Especially if he lives in a community where there are no blacks (or Orientals, or Indians, or Chicanos, or . . .)? Not only does he fall an easy prey to the idea that only white people are important (after all, they're the only ones writers write about), but he is unprepared to see blacks as human beings when he does encounter them. As Saunders Redding has said:

> . . .with all the weight of psychic and symptomatic support behind it, the assumption /that the white man is superior to the black/ has operated to produce a body of alleged knowledge that, exalting the Western

> Anglo-Saxon tradition, is Rah! Rah! White Folks! generally, and in regard to American history, literature, and culture is antiblack racist specifically. This is the knowledge, compacted of distorted fact and myth, that is taught on all levels in American schools. Once absorbed, it becomes extremely difficult for the average white to believe in equality, freedom and human dignity for the black, and equally difficult for the average black to believe himself worthy of them.[4]

What the white child can gain from the "extra-tribal experience" (to borrow a marvelous phrase from C. Eric Lincoln) of reading about black Americans, then, is also two-fold: the concept of black Americans as integral to our society, and the self-concept of himself as part of a diverse, plural society.[5]

Before I go on to my third word, there is one other facet of the idea of self-concept that must be at least mentioned, and that is the self-concept of the English teacher. Who is the teacher; what vision has he of himself, whose classroom performance, recommendations, enthusiasms, and attitudes are based on and perpetuate an impaired and unsound knowledge of his own field of specialization. And before you begin to feel defensively guilty, let me remind you that most of us are the product of the very forces Saunders Redding was talking about--the assumptions that shaped our education are the ones we are now striving to change so that no further generations will need major surgery on their psyches. Lloyd Alexander, writing in Bookbird, a journal on children's literature published by the International Board on Books for Young People in Vienna, seems to be talking

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[4]Saunders Redding. "The Black Youth Movement," American Scholar, Autumn 1969, p. 585.

[5]If you are interested in a very good article about the development of minority group self-concept in relation to reading, I recommend the one by Eunice Newton, "Bibliotherapy in the Development of Minority Group Self Concept," in the Summer 1969 issue of Journal of Negro Education, p. 257.

about the problem we face when he says:

> We are beginning to learn that intangibles have more specific gravity than we suspected, that ideas can generate as much forward thrust as Atlas missiles. We may win a victory in exploring the infinities of outer space, but it will be a Pyrrhic victory unless we can also explore the infinities of our inner spirit. We have supersensitive thermographs to show us the slightest variations in skin temperature. No devices can teach us the irrelevance of skin color. We can transplant a heart from one person to another in a brilliant feat of surgical virtuosity. Now we are ready to try it the hard way: transplanting understanding, compassion, and love from one person to another.[6]

And so I come to the idea of relevance. We will admit that we are here--I am here talking about black literature--because the subject is terribly, and I use the word deliberately, relevant. To know more about the literary heritage of black Americans is imperative. We feel that if we can repair the neglect that has kept the experience of black literature shut off from us, both black and white, we are to some extent fulfilling our responsibility to society as teachers and as human beings. But, as I said at the beginning, the word relevance has fallen into disrepute in these latter days, and perhaps part of the reason is expressed by Peter Wagschal in his guest editorial in the October 1969 Phi Delta Kappan, an article he called, "On the Irrelevance of Relevance." The question he wants us to ask is "relevant to what?" He says:

> Without wishing to appear the picky grammarian, I am forced to admit that the clamor to 'make education relevant' now strikes me as disastrously incomplete and unintelligible. I can't remember ever using the word 'relevant' without adding 'to x.' . . . To say that education is not relevant to twentieth century American life and then move on to other considerations

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[6] Lloyd Alexander, "Wishful Thinking--or Hopeful Dreaming," Bookbird, Vol. VII, No. 3, 1969, p. 4.

> is . . .to pass over the most crucial issue in America today, in or out of education: Do we want institutions, educational or otherwise, which are 'relevant' to America as it is? As it probably will be if current trends prevail? Or as it ought to be if we could exert some control over the future? (p. 61).

And it seems to me that if we do our job in showing young people the integrity of American literature by including all our writers; and if we help them develop realistic world-concepts as well as self-concepts; then we are helping to make education relevant to the way America ought to be, in the good sense that Peter Wagschal demands when he says: "I . . .want education to be 'relevant'--to the cultivation of the most vital and enriching aspects of humanity--the capacities for joy, awareness, and self-direction that are the hallmarks of being human." ". . .education could, if it had visions of a more healthy social order, help to change America's course toward more viable directions." (p. 61). And to my way of thinking, one of the ways of doing that is inherent in the fact of our presence here today. To quote Saunders Redding once more: ". . .The final test of Afro-American studies will be the extent to which they rid the minds of whites and blacks alike of false learning, and the extent to which they promote for blacks and whites alike a completely rewarding participation in American life." (p. 287).

The jazz man and poet Ted Joans reminds us of this in his collection, Black Pow-Wow in a poem called "Faces".[7]

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[7]Ted Joans, Black Pow-Wow, Hill and Wang American Century Series #0093, p. 102.